



A Woman's View

HOW HOLLYWOOD SPOKE TO WOMEN,
1930–1960

JEANINE BASINGER

A K N O P F  B O O K

ALSO BY JEANINE BASINGER

The “It’s a Wonderful Life” Book
The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre
Anthony Mann



Joan Crawford, punching the time clock, at the start of *Mannequin* ([photo credits fm1.1](#))

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 ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK 1993

This Is a Borzoi Book
Published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

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Owing to limitations of space, acknowledgments for permission to reprint previously published material will be found following the Index.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Basinger, Jeanine.

A woman's view: how Hollywood spoke to women, 1930–1960 / Jeanine Basinger. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

eISBN: 978-0-307-83154-5

1. Motion pictures for women. 2. Women in motion pictures.

I. Title.

PN1995.9.W6B36 1993

791.43'082—dc20 93-268

v3.1

FOR MY MOTHER

Sarah E. Pickett Deyling

For her courage, hard work, love,
and intelligence, and for
letting me go to the movies
whenever I wanted to ...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS IS A BOOK that could have gone on forever, and almost did. Once I observed the things I refer to, I found them in every film about women that I saw and wanted to write about them all. Time and space prevented the discussions of literally hundreds of movies that fit my format, and I regret I had no space for *Ruby Gentry*, *The Toy Wife*, *Torch Song*, *Marriage Is a Private Affair*, *Road House*, *The Star*, *When Tomorrow Comes*, *Random Harvest*, *Lost Angel*, *The Legend of Lylah Clare*, *All I Desire*, *There's Always Tomorrow* ... and many more.

I thank all the people who found movies for me and shared them: Jeffrey Lane, Richard Teller, Toni Ross, David Kendall, Joe and Kit Reed (intrepid friends who'll watch anything), Richard Slotkin (always a generous and supportive colleague), Bernard Dick, Eric Spilker, and Leonard Maltin. Research help came from Sarah Projansky, Jeremy Arnold, Louis Maggiotto, and Susan Glatzer, and excellent hospitality as well as rare films were provided by Jan-Christopher Horak of Eastman House, Mary Lea Bandy at the Museum of Modern Art, Maxine Fleckner Ducey at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, and Jean Firstenberg of the American Film Institute. For help with photos and research, I thank Mary Corliss of the Museum of Modern Art Stills Department, Howard Mandelbaum of Photofest, and Robert Cosenza of the Kobal Collection.

I am grateful to Leith Johnson of the Wesleyan Cinema Archives for his support, and I am forever indebted to Claire LaPila, Administrative Assistant of the Archives, because without her this book would never have reached completion. She was invaluable. And anytime I undertake a project like this, I thank my husband, John, and my daughter, Savannah, who help with everything from ideas and organization to grocery shopping. I want to thank the people at Knopf who worked so hard and well on the book: Iris Weinstein, Karen Mugler, Andy Hughes, and Sarah Burnes. Finally, I must thank my editor, Bob Gottlieb, who, after suggesting the project, accompanied me willingly to far-flung places like upstate New York and Wisconsin, where we confronted that confounding thing known as "the woman's film." Without him, I would not have known about *Weekend Marriage*, *Sarah and Son*, and *Mountain Justice*, to name only a few, and I would have missed our riveting discussions about Ruth Chatterton and gold lamé.

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THE GENRE

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, powers of observation were needed, because no one told you anything. You were awash in a sea of noninformation, and it was up to you to paddle your own canoe to whatever shore of truth you could locate. There were no PBS shows in which friendly animals explained everything from the number 6 to sexual molestation, and there were no colorful little books about *Your Appendix and You*. We children all coped as best we could, sharing dubious shards of information, discarding them and keeping them as seemed fit. For instance, we all knew that Rae Greb's idea that her parents slept in the same bed so her father could do something odd with her mother was sheer nonsense, but we were reasonably interested in David Christensen's idea that a little man lived in the refrigerator to turn the light off and on. Since we lived in a world of alert mothers, we had limited opportunities to find out anything that might be useful to us later in life. We were forced back upon youth's most trusted form of information gathering: spying on adults by pretending to play paper dolls while secretly watching and listening. This didn't gain us much ("Hush! It's the children!"), but fortunately our research was aided by an unexpected, and largely uncensored, bonanza: the local movie house. In those days, parents felt safe sending their children, alone and untended, downtown to the movies. Fortified by Walnettos and popcorn, limited only by our own lack of courage in moments of horror and stymied only by our lack of data to apply to what we saw, we watched in peace and felt like grown-ups—a part of the action, a part of the decision-making process. Adults might have been going to the movies to escape, but we children went to get into the thick of things, to be in that place where the real world always said "No children allowed."

Thus it was that, like so many before me, I began doing my first serious research into my future life as a female person by going to the movies. I can't say it was an unpleasant job—far from it—but it surely was a confusing one, because the truth is that the movies of those years contained some highly contradictory information about the woman's life. For instance, although women seemed to feel that husbands were the most important thing in the world, men apparently were not to be trusted because they were always dying unexpectedly, getting fired, and running off with chorus girls. These movie women seemed to feel that it was desperately important to be married, yet marriage was an economic disaster in which women had to start baking pies

professionally or taking in washing. Women were supposed to be sexually desirable, knowing how to tempt and satisfy men, but they were also supposed to be innocent and pure. How was that going to work? Women needed to be glamorous and lavishly dressed to gain the attention of men and the envy of other women (this latter being particularly important), but they were greedy little beasts if they coveted expensive clothes and jewelry. Instead of asking for things, they should create stunning outfits out of the draperies or produce a cookie jar crammed with about a million dollars' worth of egg money to hand over to their man when his automobile factory went broke. Women needed protection because they feared spiders, but they could survive Indian attacks and cholera and fashion failures. They seemed completely capable of bopping villains on the heads with frying pans, and although they screamed a lot, they could run faster than the Wolf Man when he turned up on a moonlit night to try to date them.

None of this made much sense, but then neither did a lot of other things I saw. For instance, movies also told me that all professors smoked pipes, but none at our local college did. Bats were really vampires, but people who believed that could also be talked into believing you could tip over a cow. When you told off your boss, he loved you for it, and tomboys grew up to be Lana Turner, two ideas clearly without merit. Justice would always be done, because we lived in America, and that was the American way. (No one who had Miss Bertha Norem for grade-school math would ever believe *that*.)

Even as children, we knew how much of what we were seeing was untrue, wishful, escapist. What were we—idiots? I am always astonished at how so much writing about old movies assumes that the audience believed everything in them. Of course we didn't. We entered into the joyful conspiracy of moviegoing. We chose what we temporarily wanted to pretend was true, and when real experience didn't provide a yardstick, we cautiously wondered and questioned. We grew to understand and accept the great secret of the Hollywood film: its ambivalence, its knowing pretense. You were a fool to believe any of it, but you were a fool if you didn't. You could have it both ways, neither way, one way or the other. It didn't matter, because movies were really only about one thing: a kind of yearning. A desire to know what you didn't know, have what you didn't have, and feel what you were afraid to feel. They were a door to the Other, to the Something Else.

Nowhere is this more manifest than in the mysterious entity known in the 1930s, 1940s, and into the 1950s as the woman's film. Most of these movies have plots that no one could possibly take seriously. For instance, Barbara Stanwyck is sent to prison by her rich young lover's mother, and when she gets out and can't find a job as a waitress, she apparently has no choice but to become a famous Broadway star overnight (*Shopworn*, 1932). When Bette Davis's husband, who was presumed dead, turns up (and husbands are always doing that, as we all know), Davis thinks she'd better shoot and kill her current lover because he just might decide to spoil the husband's cello debut at Carnegie Hall (*Deception*, 1946). A little sensible talk is never allowed to

sort things out. In *Paid in Full* (1950), when Elizabeth Scott accidentally backs her car over, and kills, her sister's child, she generously compensates by sleeping with the sister's husband so she can bear the two of them a suitable replacement. One oddball event after another piles up in *To Each His Own* (1946), in which small-town girl Olivia de Havilland (who actually won an Oscar for her trouble) bears the child of her dead war hero after their one-night stand. Not wanting to embarrass her father, de Havilland has the baby out of town, but concocts a scheme whereby she can keep it. On the very night that her best friend is giving birth, de Havilland plans to sneak out and leave *her* baby (which she has been hiding in her house) on her friend's doorstep. She will then just casually drop by, presumably to see how the childbirth is coming along, and then magnanimously volunteer to take this unexpected extra baby off her friend's hands. The plot assumes that there will be no questions, such as Hey! Where did this kid come from? or Why did de Havilland stop by? or Why does an unmarried young girl want a baby? or even Is an unwed girl going to be allowed to adopt? The movie just plows forward toward its key moment in which the friend's baby is born dead, and the desperate father gratefully scoops de Havilland's convenient substitute off the front steps, placing it in his grieving wife's arms just in time to keep her from going crazy. The audience is then asked to suffer over de Havilland's loss, and—although she does end up becoming a wealthy cosmetics tycoon—to see her life as a total tragedy because she never gets a chance to mother her own son until he is fully grown. The fact that all these events grow out of initial carelessness, all-around bad planning, and lack of honesty is swept aside. A crackpot plot becomes the excuse for one woman's life of intense suffering.

What's astonishing is that these plots work. Women's films are cautionary tales of a particularly desperate stripe, but they contain real passion, real anger. The lunacy verifies them. There's something fabulous about the craziness, a kind of appealing madness that is indigenous to both the literary and filmed world of women, but that we accept as noble in literature (*Wuthering Heights*), while condemning it as foolish in movies. Although many women's films are unquestionably demented, I salute their reckless plots, in which well-dressed stars act out the woman's form of heroism: living outside the rules of correct behavior, which in story terms is realized by living outside the rules of logical narrative construction.

No one ever suggests how unintentionally liberating a form the woman's film actually was. The stories were a kind of protective coloring, which allowed women to step outside the rules and thus be riotously freed. Wheeeeeee! And it was a safe way to lift the restrictions, because the out-of-control plots were just too, too bizarre. Women in the audience could watch while their favorite female stars wore great clothes, sat on great furniture, loved bad men, had lots of sex, told the world off for restricting them, destroyed their enemies, even gave their children away. Women could ruin their lives—get free of everything—down at the movie house for twenty-five

cents with butter on their popcorn. What was even more wonderful, no one cared. There were no articles written on the subject of “What Is Gold Lamé Doing to Our Mothers?” or “Will George Brent Destroy Civilization?” Society didn’t feel threatened. When the end of the movie came around, the surrogate woman was usually dead, punished, or back in the fold, aware of the error of her ways. Since the stories were so obviously cracked, and since the heroines paid dearly for their unrestrained behavior, it all seemed a perfectly safe form of pseudoliberalism for women to enjoy.

The woman’s film was successful because it worked out of a paradox. It both held women in social bondage and released them into a dream of potency and freedom. It drew women in with images of what was lacking in their own lives and sent them home reassured that their own lives were the right thing after all. If it is true, as many suggest, that Hollywood films repressed women and sought to teach them what they ought to do, then it is equally clear that, in order to achieve this, the movies first had to bring to life the opposite of their own morality. To convince women that marriage and motherhood were the right path, movies had to show women making the mistake of doing something else. By making the Other live on the screen, movies made it real. By making it real, they made it desirable. By making it desirable, they made it possible. They gave the Other substance, and thus gave it credibility. In asking the question, What should a woman do with her life? they created the possibility of an answer different from the one they intended to provide at the end of the movie.

Thus, what emerges on close examination of hundreds of women’s movies is how strange and ambivalent they really are. Stereotypes are presented, then undermined, and then reinforced. Contradictions abound, which at first seem to be merely the result of carelessness, the products of commercial nonsense. But they are more than plot confusion. They exist as an integral and even necessary aspect of what drives the movies and gives them their appeal. These movies were a way of recognizing the problems of women, of addressing their desire to have things be other than the way they were offscreen.

The woman’s film is the slyboots of genre; or, to put it bluntly, the woman’s a two-face. Of all the genres in Hollywood’s history, the woman’s film is the most deceptive, as appropriate to the sex that has had to achieve its goals partly through subversion. Everything the woman’s film is, it also isn’t. Everything it endorses, it undermines. Everything it destroys, it reaffirms. This is fundamental to a full definition of the woman’s film, and it is also, I suspect, the main reason for its success. These are not films that tell a lie, like many of Hollywood’s escapist dreams. These are films that tell the truth, but only because they are about the unhappiness of women. They’ll tell all the lies in the world to make that one point clear.

How, then, can the woman’s film be defined? What is “the woman’s film”? As is true of all genres, its assumed definition seems to blur somewhat upon concrete examination of the movie evidence. Some people feel that the woman’s film is the same thing as melodrama, but that equation would

eliminate more than half of the films that are concerned with women and their fates, among them Rosalind Russell's career comedies, musical biographies of real-life women, combat films featuring brave nurses on Bataan, and westerns in which women drive cattle west and men over the brink. The truth is that the woman's film is not all that easy to define, being something contradictory, elusive, hypocritical, and deceptive.

Genres are usually defined by specifics: recurring characters, settings, dialogues, locations in time and place, plot events—all of which seem to serve some larger social or mythological purpose for the viewing audience. Although this purpose can be transformed over time in an evolutionary process that inverts it from good to bad, and the films may try to fool us by putting on new hats, the familiar conventions themselves (characters, settings, and so on) more or less remain fixed and recognizable. True to generic form in this conventional sense, the woman's film has its own familiar plots, predictable exchanges of dialogue, and recurring filmic techniques. For instance, music is likely to swell up on the sound track in key moments, an aural equivalent to a woman's passion; or a beautiful young girl will be lit from behind so that there appears to be a halo around her head. Sometimes people actually *do* say "I'll need plenty of hot water" when a baby is about to be born, and often enough, when a woman cries out "I'm happy, so terribly happy; everything is perfect," she either immediately gets cancer, or her husband dies, or the economic roof falls in on her head. Women's films tell stories of rags to riches, riches to rags, unwed motherhood, spinsterhood, betrayal by a loved one, the battle of the sexes, the other woman, the need for sacrifice, and plain old girl meets boy in all its variations, including girl kills boy or boy kills girl. Movies about women, which are often stories about sex, also find familiar visual ways to signal to audiences that the leading lady is having a fulfilling experience: fireplace flames, fireworks displays, and waves crashing to shore. Repeated episodes about meaningful events in a woman's life appear and reappear: fashion shows, parties and dances, weddings and proms. And there is one unique convention that almost never appears anywhere except in a woman's film, the Happy Interlude.

This sequence, which might also be called the Bliss Montage, is familiar to anyone who watches old movies. In it, the leading lady can be seen laughing her head off, dressed in fabulous clothes, racing across the water in a speedboat, her yachtsman lover at her side. In an immediate scene change, she is seen peering through binoculars at a racetrack, cheering wildly behind her furs while her horse romps across the finish line in first place. Next, she's dancing cheek to cheek at a lavish nightclub, an orchid on her satin shoulder, her suavely tuxedoed man in her arms. Finally, she is all in organza, ruffled to a fare-thee-well, picnicking beside a stream, her hand trailing in water while the moss drips, the willows weep, and her cow-eyed lover strums a ukulele. This, of course, would be in the ritzy version. In the poor-girl variation, she goes bowling or roller-skating, eats a hot dog at a ballpark, holds hands in the upper balcony of the Roxy, and rides the roller coaster at Coney. Her Happy

Interlude is a woman's small piece of action, her marginal territory of joy. It occurs between "after she meets the man" and "before he lets her down or something really awful happens." Its visual presentation, as a montage, finds the cinematic equivalent of its own meaning: the rapid and brief passage of time in which a woman can be happy. (Note that one of the main events of the woman's film is actually a nonevent, nothing more than a representational piece of editing that allows her maybe two minutes' running time of joy.)

The Happy Interlude is presented as visual action, but it is actually a static piece of information for the audience. Viewers do not see it as "Janet and Ed went to the races," but as "Janet and Ed are happy." Furthermore, they also grasp a secondary level of information: "And it isn't going to last." Some trouble, however temporary, will threaten it. This is one of the major differences between the woman's film and more active male-oriented genres, like the western. The shoot-out or the cattle drive, two familiar conventions of the western, are story-driven active events. Action does not represent the woman's life in films the way it represents the man's. The ritual events of male films—taking an objective in combat, racing the bootleggers across the Canadian border, withstanding the Indian raid—are defined by the man's individual courage. The ritual events of female films—weddings, proms, births, and even the Happy Interlude—are defined by nature or society, and the woman is bound by the rules.

Considering the woman's film in these traditional genre terms, however, immediately poses some problems. For instance, there are huge differences among such titles as the screwball comedy *Unfinished Business* (1941), the murder story *Sudden Fear* (1952), the western *Johnny Guitar* (1954), the musical *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), the film noir *The Locket* (1946), or the biographical *Madame Curie* (1943), yet each can be defined as a woman's film. In women's films, the fixed conventions, while they *do* exist, do not exist in quite the same way as in other genres. The woman's film isn't set in any one time or place, and its locale can be real or imaginary. It can be contemporary or historical. It can easily be a biography of a real person, and just as easily be a totally fictional account of a tomboy, a princess, a space explorer, or an ordinary shop girl. It may be purely a generic woman's film of the type most people envision when they think of women's films (a melodrama with a big-name female movie star), but it may also be a female variation of some other, presumably more "masculine" genre, such as a western or a gangster movie. The woman's film, ironically, isn't even always about a woman, the ultimate insult to a gender that has, in the words of W. C. Fields's mother-in-law in *The Bank Dick* (1940), "just had to take and take."

Thus, attempting to unlock a definition of the woman's film by identifying repeated plots, characters, and conventions fails to yield much beyond what one knew before one started, which is that a film about a woman, or about a woman's life, is going to be about love, marriage, men, sex, fashion and glamour, and the need to make a decision about having a career or not. Tracking out repeated plot developments leads into a labyrinth involving

these issues. There are enough crazy, unpredictable plot twists in women's films to give anyone pause—as when Kay Francis in *Mary Stevens, M.D.* (1933) saves a small boy's life by ripping a bobby pin out of her hair and plunging it down the child's throat to keep him from choking to death. You don't see that one repeated very often. (A woman's action usually comes in response to trouble, or else it is an act of sudden emotional or irrational behavior. On the whole, the woman's film is passive, internal, psychological in its story and characterization.) This unexpected female action seems bizarre, memorable, dramatic, or comic simply because it is action, action being the man's prerogative and not the woman's.

Because of this, one cannot effectively define the woman's film the same way one defines other genres, or, more to the point, one *can* define it the same way, but then one has ignored its main characteristic, which is that rather than repeat active events as a ritual for the audience to experience and reexperience the woman's film juxtaposes in unrealistic ways two contradictory concepts: the Way Women Ought to Be and the Other Way.

Watching hundreds of women's films reveals how cleverly they contradicted themselves, how easily they reaffirmed the status quo for the woman's life while providing little releases, small victories—or even big releases, big victories. From movie to movie or within one single movie, opposing attitudes were voiced and demonstrated. Women could hear Rosalind Russell in *Rendezvous* (1935) saying, “It's a man's place to make the money for the house, and the woman's place to take care of the man when he comes home. A woman with a career wouldn't have time to bring up a lot of kids.” However, she might also have heard Ruth Chatterton flatly remark that “some women like to have a man around the house ... not me, I'd rather have a canary” in *Female* (1933) or Bonita Granville saying “I think every girl should have a career” in *Nancy Drew, Detective* (1938) or Hedda Hopper in *Rebound* (1931) demanding to know “Am I a failure because I didn't get married? Does marriage make a woman any better?” Cedric Hardwicke suggested in *Valley of the Sun* (1942) that “the way to a woman's heart is to take her *out* of the kitchen,” but Mary Astor gushed in *Smart Woman* (1948), “I love my house ... my garden.” Walter Pidgeon paid tribute to the American woman in *Calling Bulldog Drummond* (1951) by saying she could do anything “from changing a baby to flying a Spitfire,” but a little boy told a little girl in *High Barbaree* (1947), “Aw, you're nothing. You're just an old girl.”

Even in the most appalling conversations, there can be a subversive undercurrent, as in one of the endless debates that can be found in the American movie in which men and women discuss their relationships with one another. As Elizabeth Scott pilots her expensive convertible down a Florida highway in *Dead Reckoning* (1947), she and Humphrey Bogart talk it over:

BOGART: You know the trouble with women is—they ask just too many questions. They should spend all their time just being beautiful.

SCOTT: [*ironically*] ... and let the men do the worrying ...

BOGART: Yeah. You know, I've been thinking. Women ought to come capsule size, about four inches high. When a man goes out for an evening, he just puts her in his pocket and takes her along with him, and that way he knows exactly where she is. He gets to his favorite restaurant. He puts her on the table, lets her run around among the coffee cups while he swaps a few lies with his pals ...

SCOTT: [*astounded and amazed*] Why, I ...

BOGART: ... without danger of interruption. When it comes that time in the evening when he wants her full-sized and beautiful, he just waves his hand, and there she is, full-sized.

SCOTT: Why, that's the most conceited statement I've ever heard.

BOGART: Well, if she starts to interrupt, he just shrinks her back to pocket-size and puts her away.

SCOTT: [*suddenly confident*] I understand. What you're saying is, women are made to be loved.

BOGART: [*suddenly confused*] Is that what I was saying?

SCOTT: [*firmly*] Yes. It's a confession, really. A woman may drive you out of your mind. You wouldn't trust her. Because you couldn't put her in your pocket, you'd get all mixed up.

A man has confidently vocalized a horrible attitude toward women, but a woman has turned it around in a covert manner. If you can't control a woman through "love," indicates Scott, you can't cope and certainly can never master her. None of this is really what the movie is about, but a sharp listener hears something interesting. As it turns out, Scott is a murderess and has been ahead of Bogart every step of the way in all the other important matters of the film, too. For this, she will end up dead, but at least she had Bogart's number.

Over and over again, conversations take place about the woman's proper role in life. Questions are asked. Should she have sex while unmarried or not have sex? Should she have children or not have children? Should she marry for love or for money? Should she be dominated by men or should she take matters into her own hands? Should she kill the rat who ruined her life or just grin and bear it? By asking the questions, the film prepared an audience to find its own answers. It's obvious that seeds of unrest, even rebellion, were planted in some female minds by the evidence they saw on-screen, despite the conventional endings that turn a story into a cautionary tale. When morality has to dramatize its own opposite to make its point, the opposite takes on a life of its own. The film becomes accidentally ambivalent, contradictory. It sends two messages, though they're allegedly resolved by a hokey finale. This ambivalence makes the woman's film a quagmire. And a masquerade.

Often, an entire movie is about this contradiction, telling a story in which

women are shown to live in society in one role while secretly preferring another. In *Now, Voyager* (1942), one of the most successful and moving women's pictures ever made, Bette Davis enacts such a story, well demonstrated by one key scene. Chic and self-assured, Davis goes to an elegant preconcert cocktail party with her betrothed, the rich and blue-blooded John Loder. She is woman's-film chic, dressed in sequined satin, suavely coiffed, and wrapped in luscious mink. On her fur she wears meaningful camellias, a gift from her secret married lover (Paul Henreid). Across the crowded room, she and Henreid unexpectedly spot each other, and Henreid is struck dumb by her beauty. The music swells. They draw together and brilliantly enact a double-layered conversation. On a highly audible level, they speak as casual strangers, making appropriate cocktail-party chitchat. "I believe we met on a pleasure cruise" and "Yes, I've been here for ten months now." Beneath this, in hushed tones, they communicate privately in a conversation heard only by them and, of course, the audience. "I had no idea you'd be here" and "I am so proud I could burst." This is a scene and a conversation about a woman who must live in polite society without what she really needs or wants. The idea is carried out through the visual metaphor of two people in a highly public social context trying to conform on the surface level to what is expected of them, but revealing in conversation and yearning looks what it is they really want and really feel. The success of *Now, Voyager* is no doubt partly related to the connection women in the audience felt with Davis's character. If they went to the local cinema to feed themselves on fantasies because they felt emotionally deprived or starved, here was a heroine just like them. Rich and glamorous though she is, she, too, is going to have to make do. She will have something, but it won't be what she dreams of or really needs.

This kind of saying one thing and showing another, or the raising of social questions within a safe context, is typical of all Hollywood movies, not just the woman's film. For instance, during Hollywood's transition-to-sound period, gangster movies were very popular, spewing out tough talk and machine gun bullets. When the censors became nervous about the glamorizing of gangsters, a crackdown took place. Hollywood immediately found a simple way to deal with the problem. It went on making gangster films, with all the same talk and the same bullets, but it killed off the bad guys at the end and announced: "Crime does not pay." Everyone seems aware of this ruse, and much has been written about the cheap attempt to make violence acceptable by a last-minute line of dialogue or character turnaround. Isn't it interesting, then, that when a woman's film shows a woman in power for eighty-five minutes and reverses that in the last five minutes ("Oh, Maude, give up your presidency. Come back to me and the children."), everyone seems to feel that this reversal defines the entire movie more than the rest of the film does? Why is this? If "Crime does not pay" is an FBI advertising slogan pasted onto a movie as an excuse for its celebration of violence, what is "I think I'll bake cookies instead of curing cancer"?

The most significant thing about the women's films of the 1930s–1950s period is the way they display this consistently inconsistent purpose and attitude. The crazy plots, the desperate characters, and whatever settings and time periods the woman's film inhabits can be best considered under the umbrella of three main purposes:

- To place a woman at the center of the story universe (“I am a woman, and I am important”)
- To reaffirm in the end the concept that a woman's true job is that of just being a woman, a job she can't very well escape no matter what else she does, with the repression disguised as *love* (“Love is my true job!”)
- To provide a temporary visual liberation of some sort, however small—an escape into a purely romantic love, into sexual awareness, into luxury, or into the rejection of the female role that might only come in some form of questioning (“What other choices do I have?”)

These purposes, which were no more understood or planned by the people who created them than those of any other Hollywood genre, are at once revealed to be at cross-purposes; they conflict with one another and contradict one another. These movies, like other kinds of Hollywood films, provided audiences with what they didn't have in a format that was related to what they *did* have, with a reconciliation between the two implied, however falsely, at the ending. For the woman's film, though, this contradiction is built solidly into the definition of the genre, and is, in fact, present as a motivating force in every story.

THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE:

“I Am a Woman and I Am Important”

MICHAEL WOOD writes in *America at the Movies*, “It seems that entertainment is not, as we often think, a full-scale flight from our problems, not a means of forgetting them completely, but rather a rearrangement of our problems into shapes which tame them, which disperse them to the margins of our attention.”



Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*. Before (with Claude Rains) ([photo credits 1.1](#))

Since a woman's problems were usually shoved to the margins of society's attention, the woman's film did the opposite. It entertained women by rearranging their particular problems and worries into shapes that released them onto the screen, putting them front and center as terribly important and terribly real. Although a great many movies about women were made—some positive and some negative, some serious and some comic—one thing about all of them was consistent. In them, women were not marginalized. They were what the movie was about.

In movies about women, all important historical and natural events are translated into the terms of a woman's daily life. World War I is not about the Allies versus the Kaiser. It's about how unmarried women become pregnant when they have sex. The Depression is not about an economic collapse. It's about runs in stockings, no money for carfare, and being forced out onto the streets. Natural disasters like earthquakes and cholera epidemics are defined by miscarriages and dying children. Everything is couched in terms of what are presumed to be the major events of a woman's life: love, men, marriage, motherhood, and all the usual "feminine" things. At the same time that big events are made small, personal, small events are made huge. A woman's purchase of a new hat becomes a significant and meaningful moment on which much attention is lavished. If she comes home with her hat and no one notices it, it is a catastrophe that can lead to argument, divorce, or even murder.



... and After (with Paul Henreid) ([photo credits 1.2](#))

Whatever the plot, whatever the tone, whatever the outcome, the woman's film accomplishes one important thing for its viewers: It puts the woman at the center of the universe. Thus, the woman's film is a genre that generously empowers a sex that society has relegated to secondary status. The gigantic silver screen shimmers and glows, and on it women may be seen to be astonishing in their beauty, intimidating in their outfits. They talk, and everyone listens. They cry, and everyone feels sad. They laugh, and everyone perks up. They need a glass of water, and everyone fetches. Most important of all, men worship them. Rich and handsome, virile and exciting, powerful and dominating men get down on their knees and beg women to listen to them, to kiss them, to marry them, to go to the prom, to fly high in the sky in the ominously named Fokker Fighter. These men want to eat barbecue! "Eat barbecue with me," the men cry out, "oh, please, please, please...." The women laugh gay little laughs, toss their heads, and, well, maybe they'll eat barbecue and maybe they won't eat barbecue. *They'll* decide. If. Who. When. Why. On the screen, in the woman's film, the woman will decide. She is important. She matters. She is the Center of the Universe.

Even before we meet the character of Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager*, we realize that, ugly and unloved as she may be, she is nevertheless the center of the universe. The film opens by dramatically setting the stage for Charlotte's entrance. There is heavy rain pouring down outside a city mansion. Inside is a world of wealth and luxury, vast halls and giant staircases. It is 4:00 p.m., teatime, as an anxious butler and nervous maid get ready to cope with the